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## MX Is A Serious Mistake

The changing balance of strategic nuclear forces between the United States and the Soviet Union has in the last few years been a major focus of attention for the American intelligence community. Until the late 1960s, the United States was militarily stronger than the Soviet Union by virtue of its superior nuclear arsenal. We felt secure. The Soviets didn't, and they set out to correct the imbalance.

The result has been that in the last several years all of the best studies have shown that the balance of strategic nuclear capabilities has been tipping in favor of the Soviet Union.

The Carter administration recognized this imbalance and developed an ambitious plan to build a mammoth new intercontinental ballistic missile system known as the MX. Congress has provided initial financing, and already contractors from California to Massachusetts are building test sites and hiring designers and workers. Some 10,000 workers are already involved.

I believe the MX project as presently conceived is a serious mistake.

The official estimates of the total cost of the MX run from the Air Force's \$36 billion to the General Accounting Office's \$56 billion. Each missile will weigh 95 tons, two and a half times more than our most current ICBM, the Minuteman III, and will carry 10 separate warheads. To construct a base for it will require, according to some estimates, 40 percent of the country's total cement production for three years, and more dirt will have to be moved and more land sequestered than for the Panama Canal.

MX is also a new concept in ICBMs. Our present Minuteman ICBMs are loaded in fixed, underground silos of concrete, reinforced to help them withstand nuclear attack. MX, in contrast, will be semimobile. Twenty-three shelters, about a mile apart, are to be built for each MX.

Each of the 200 missiles will ride on a 201-foot-long transporter-launcher, weighing more than a million pounds, over the special highways from one of its 23 shelters to another. The Russians would be forced into a kind of shell game, if they considered an attack on our ICBMs: each MX would force them to worry about 23 targets rather than just one.

The U.S. strategic strength — strategic strength, in this context, refers to the major powers' centrally controlled nuclear forces, which are targeted against each other — is built on three legs known as the TRIAD. Each leg represents a weapons system that is launched differently: one from land bases, the second from airplanes and the third from submarines. Each leg presents the Soviet Union with a different problem should it decide to attack. While it might be able to cripple one leg, the inability to knock out all three should deter the Soviet Union from attacking at all.

The MX specifically strengthens the land — that is, the ICBM — leg. This leg is important because the size of the warheads and the accuracy of the missiles make it the most powerful part of our strategic arsenal. It is quickly responsive to a decision to launch, because the missiles can be maintained in a constant state of readiness and we have reliable, instantaneous, secure communications to them. It provides minimum warning of attack to the Soviet military, because the time from launch in the United States to detonation over the Soviet Union would be only about 30 minutes.

The other legs of the TRIAD have different virtues. Submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) provide greater assurance than either of the other weapons systems that they will survive a surprise attack. Submarines can be constantly moving and they are virtually impossible to find in broad ocean areas. Bombers can carry a large number of weapons, so they provide great destructive potential and, because the bombers themselves can be called back before they actually launch their missiles, this leg of the TRIAD is the most flexible.

Most authorities agree that today the land-launched ICBMs, our Minuteman missiles, are the most vulnerable of our strategic forces because their location is fixed, making them easy targets. But is MX the best replacement? The undertaking is so central to our national security that it is important that doubts about it be resolved.

First, what do we mean when we say that the balance of strategic nuclear forces is tipping against us? How is that balance measured? One quantitative measure is the number of weapons the United States and the Soviet Union each has. Here, America is clearly ahead. We can attack more individual targets than the Russians can.

Another measure is the ability to inflict damage. Here the Soviet Union is well ahead. The Soviets hold both an absolute lead in total number of ICBMs and a relative lead in the ability to destroy missiles that are housed in hardened silos. This advantage reflects, first, the fact that there are 400 to 600 fewer ICBM targets in the United States than in the Soviet Union. Second, it reflects a basic trend in strategic warfare. Improvements in weapon accuracy are more than offsetting any efforts to harden silos. Direct hits can destroy even hardened silos.

We could do two things to right this imbalance. We could increase our ability to attack hardened targets in the Soviet Union and we could make our ICBM forces less vulnerable. But whatever we do, it must not only correct the actual imbalance of capability; it must also correct the perception of imbalance. It must be made clear in the minds of Soviet officials as well as other world leaders that the Soviet Union does not have an edge on the United States in strategic nuclear strength.

A major step in doing that is to create the impression that the United States is seriously committed to improving our strategic forces, even if in reality some of the actions we take will contribute only to overkill. Changing the world's perception that we are falling behind the Soviet Union is as important as not falling behind in fact. Deterrence is the key goal of strategic nuclear forces, and what will or will not deter a nuclear attack is sometimes more psychological than quantifiable.

The MX would, indeed, meet these objectives. It is designed to hit hard targets. It is less vulnerable than Minuteman because each missile can shuttle among the 23 alternative launching shelters rather than sit in one fixed silo. And, proceeding with the most expensive public works program ever contemplated would certainly give an impression that America was serious about restoring the strategic balance.

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